

Every Inch a King

Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship
in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds

Edited by

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ARCHITECTURE AND THE REPRESENTATIONS OF KINGSHIP DURING THE REIGN OF THE SAFAVID SHAH 'ABBAS I

Kishwar Rizvi

Authority in Islamic cultures was conceived of as being both imperial and theocratic. The caliph or sultan was given the title “shadow of God on Earth” and his role was to uphold the law and dispense justice in a manner that assured loyalty toward his leadership and harmony throughout his dominions. The person of the sultan was universally believed to be the repository of ultimate power, yet the way in which this power was represented varied according to specific geographic and historical criteria. In all cases, however, the ruler's rightly-guided authority was formulated through judicial, military, and artistic means. That is, the representation of power was constructed by clerics, historians, poets, painters and architects of the court. This imperial image was monumentalized through historical compendia, architecture and the arts of the book, which have left us ample material through which the vision and, occasionally, the personality, of a ruler may be studied.

The early modern period in Islamic history is full of the names and exploits of great kings, from Timur Lang (Tamerlane) to Mehmet the Conqueror. In the sixteenth century the reigns of three kings stand out, namely that of Suleyman (r. 1520–66) in Ottoman Turkey, Akbar (r. 1556–1605) in Mughal India, and 'Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) in Safavid Iran. All three are renowned for the manner in which they defined their respective empires through the patronage of works of art and architecture. The aim of this chapter is to study one of them, Shah 'Abbas, who was instrumental in transforming Iran's political and architectural history in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹ Prominent among the cultural products of his reign are the historical chronicles written in his court and the extensive architectural and engineering projects he commissioned. They represent the negotiations that were undertaken between the private courtly realm

¹ This essay is part of a larger project on art, literature, and architectural culture during the reign of Shah 'Abbas. Partial funding has been provided by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the Morse Junior Faculty Grant, Yale University.

and the public ceremonial that together served to define this complex and fascinating king.

Safavid Iran was founded in 1501 by Isma'il, son of Haidar, a descendant of the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic, Safi al-Din Ishaq of Ardabil. Shah Isma'il established Shi'ism as the state religion, notably by conscripting clerics from older Shi'i centres, such as Iraq and Jabal 'Amil, to aid in its institutionalization. During the early reign of Isma'il's son, Shah Tahmasb, Safavid genealogy was redacted, such that it led back to the Prophet Muhammad through the seventh Shi'i Imam, Musa al-Kazim, thereby adding an additional layer of authority to their elevated position as heads of the Safaviyya order. Thus both Sufism and Shi'ism were the foundations upon which Safavid kingship was built. An additional pillar was the concept of Iranian kingship, as defined in such poetic/mythic texts as Abu'l-Qasim Firdausi's eleventh-century epic, the *Shahnama* ("Book of Kings"), which laid emphasis on the history of pre-Islamic empires, such as the Sasanians. Just as the divinely-guided kings of the epic, the Safavids displayed their power through acts of piety and charity, coupled with military victory and statecraft.

In the sixteenth century the Safavid shah was depicted simultaneously as a charismatic leader, a pious believer, and a noble emperor. The representations chosen by panegyrist, poets, painters, historians and architects were often composite, based on sources about Islamic rulership as well as on Iranian archetypes. The Safavid charismatic mode of authority was one shared by other early-modern empires of this time, in Europe as well as Asia. However, unique to the Safavids was their spiritual and familial lineage, which bestowed on them an aura of semi-divinity. The imperial image was thus constructed at the interface of devotion and divinity, and actualized through material and esoteric forms of representation.

During the reign of the fifth shah, 'Abbas, the political and religious boundaries of the Safavid state were solidified. His reign has been characterized as the "golden age" of Safavid art and culture, and was well recorded by his own historians as well as numerous seventeenth-century European travellers to Iran. The societal transformations implemented by Shah 'Abbas were negotiated through a systematic and well-organised set of representations. Court historians, artists and architects were aligned in ways that most efficiently propagated Shah 'Abbas' vision of regal and spiritual authority. Literature, the arts of the book, and architecture were consolidated as sophisticated representations of his power and authority.

‘Abbas’ architectural patronage ranged from small-scale renovations of older Sufi sanctuaries to the vast restructuring of commercial trade routes throughout the Empire. Whether through the construction of the new imperial quarters in Isfahan or through barefoot pilgrimages to holy shrines, myriad aspects of the ruler’s public and private ceremonial were presented in a coherent, if complex, manner. In this essay I explore three ways in which architecture and urbanism were mobilised in order to pronounce Shah ‘Abbas’ authority: the implantation of a coherent infrastructure; the patronage of religious architecture; and the transformation of Isfahan into an imperial capital on par with those in neighbouring India and Turkey. These three “landscapes”, namely, the geographic, the sacred, and the urban, allow insights into the imperial vision of Shah ‘Abbas. They were complemented by the sometimes more intangible, if equally important, literary and visual constructs that served to provide a more human dimension to his absolutist authority.

Grand Scale

Improving infrastructure was a key component in Shah ‘Abbas’ centralisation goals and it provided crucial benefits to the state. The kingdom inherited by ‘Abbas in 1587 had been fractured by several years of in-fighting and the inability of his father to control the Qizilbash tribal cabals that vied for political domination. Over time, ‘Abbas succeeded in curbing the power of the various tribes by centralising both military and administrative authority. Crown lands were increased and the army was transformed through the establishment of new ranks for the conscripted, *ghulam* (“slave”) officers.² Economic prosperity was envisioned by ‘Abbas as a corollary to military strength, and great pains were taken to encourage trade and the production of goods for export to Europe and Asia. To facilitate the movement of goods and troops, the construction of physical infrastructure such as bridges and roads was undertaken in an unprecedented manner. A high priority was given to securing the highways, and building caravanserais along major routes. The efficacy and dynamism of

² These were often Georgian and Circassian men who were conscripted into the royal household as “slaves”. On the institution see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “*Ghulām*” (Sourdel, Bosworth, Hardy, İnalçık); on the Iranian case see C.E. Bosworth’s contribution. See also, Babaie et al., *Slaves of the Shah*.

these moves augmented Shah 'Abbas' legitimacy as a visionary and creative ruler.

The court historian, Iskandar Beg Munshi, listed Shah 'Abbas' attributes in twelve "discourses" that characterised the great monarch.³ Starting with his elevated lineage, Iskandar Beg described his piety and judgment as well as his keen administrative and judicial skills. The eleventh discourse was on the Shah's "public works and building achievements", beginning with his pious endowments that benefited holy men and the residents of shrines. Describing each city in turn, starting with Mashhad, site of the sacred shrine of the eighth Shi'i Imam, 'Ali Riza, Iskandar Beg tabulated the extensive building projects and reconstructions undertaken by orders of the Shah. In his account, Shah 'Abbas' patronage affected the city as a whole, through generous endowments and the attention paid to both infrastructure and individual buildings.

Rivers were bridged and redirected as a sign of Shah 'Abbas' control over physical space and examples abound, from the Jajin bridge in Ardabil to the Quhrud dam outside Kashan.⁴ The most magnificent of these was the bridge built in Isfahan by Shah 'Abbas' commander Allahverdi Khan, a notable *ghulam* and close associate of the king (fig. 1). Popularly known as the "Bridge of Thirty-three Spans", it is 30 meters long and spans the Zayanda-Rud, connecting the Chahar Bagh Avenue with the newly developed settlement of Armenian merchants, known as New Julfa. The bridge consisted of arcaded galleries for pedestrians enjoying the river's view in addition to providing passage for the transportation of animals and goods; it was simultaneously a thoroughfare and a public space, both aspects crucial for the prosperity of the capital.⁵ The bridge served as a symbol of Allahverdi Khan's devotion to his ruler, but also highlighted Shah 'Abbas' urban policies of resettlement and development, a point I will return to in the last section.

A vast and complex network of rest houses was built throughout the Empire in order to facilitate movement safely and effectively. As Iskandar Beg notes in his eleventh discourse, splendid caravanserais were built in the major cities of Iran, notably in Qazvin, Kashan and Isfahan.⁶ The

³ Iskandar Munshi, *History of Shah 'Abbas*, 518–44.

⁴ Shah 'Abbas' plan to divert the waters of the Kuhrang river and merge it to the Zayanda-rud was ambitious, but ultimately unsuccessful. Ibid., 1170–71. I am grateful to Charles Melville for bringing this point to my attention.

⁵ *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Isfahan: Bridges" (Babaie with Huag).

⁶ Iskandar Munshi, *History of Shah 'Abbas*, 536–37. Also mentioned in Munajjim Yazdi, *Tarikh-i 'Abbasi*, 225.

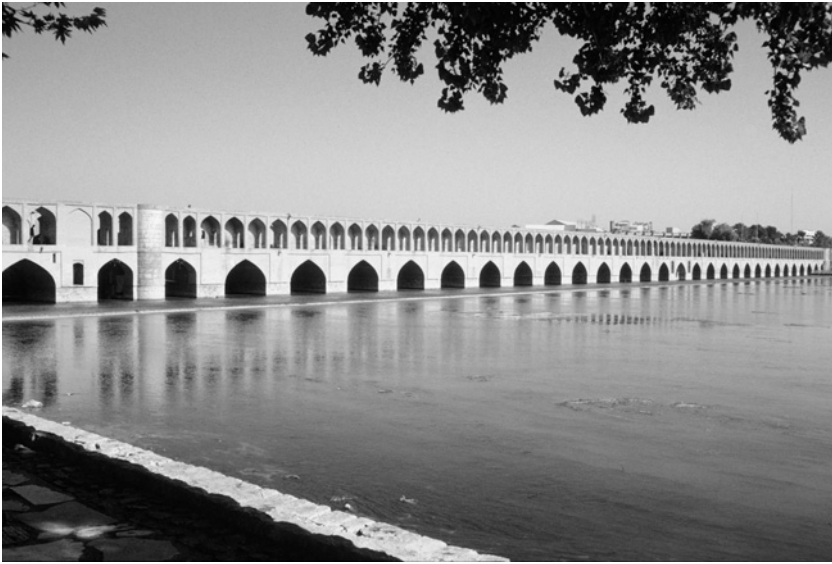


Figure 1. Allahverdi Khan Bridge, Isfahan. Courtesy of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Photographer, Tim Bradley.



Figure 2. Ganj-i 'Ali Khan, Kirman, Courtesy Harvard University.
Photographer, Roger Byron.

caravanserais were important sources of income for the state, as their presence helped encourage commerce and pilgrimage—an important component in Shah ‘Abbas’ fiscal plans. Iran had traditionally been on the crossroads of East-West trade routes, and numerous commodities passed through it in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well. Silk was exported to Europe in exchange for silver. In addition, ceramics manufacturing was established through the importation of craftsmen from as far away as China.⁷ Many new caravanserais were built during the reign of Shah ‘Abbas, such as the imposing Ganj-i ‘Ali Khan caravanserai in Kirman which was named after its patron, a governor and close associate of the Shah. The building was part of an impressive complex that included a mosque, bathhouse and bazaars (fig. 2). The foundation inscription, dated 1007 AH (1598), was designed by the noted calligrapher, ‘Ali-Riza ‘Abbasi, further linking it to the court of Shah ‘Abbas.⁸

Publicity and Piety

Taming the land by building caravanserais and highways, and controlling the rivers by building bridges and dams over them, projected an image of kingship that vied with the Divine through supremacy over nature. However, the message disseminated by Shah ‘Abbas was much more subtle; his power was veiled behind pious submission and acts of devotion. Overlaid on the trade routes were the pilgrimage networks that covered the landscape of Iran and extended far beyond, from Mecca in the south to Samarqand in the northeast. Pilgrimage was deeply entrenched in the social and religious lives of Iranians and was, in fact, one of the foundations upon which Safavid authority had been built. During Shah ‘Abbas’ reign, the major pilgrimage sites in Iran were the shrines of Shaikh Safi in Ardabil, of Imam Riza in Mashhad, and Fatima al-Ma’suma in Qum. The first was a Sufi institution that had been established since the thirteenth century and was the Safavid ancestral shrine. The latter two were the shrine of the eighth Shi’i Imam and his sister, respectively, both of whom had died in the ninth century.⁹ The shrines of the other Shi’i Imams were

⁷ Matthee, “Chapter Three: Shah ‘Abbas and the Safavid Political Economy,” in *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran*, 61–90.

⁸ *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Ganj-i Ali Khan” (Mohammad-Ebrahim Bastani Parizi). More generally, see Siroux, “Caravanserais routiers safavids”.

⁹ Rizvi, *Safavid Dynastic Shrine*. On Shah ‘Abbas’ architectural patronage of these three shrines, see Rizvi, “Sites of Pilgrimage”. For the establishment of Safavid Shi’i practice in relation to the shrines, see Gleave, “Ritual Life of the Shrines”.

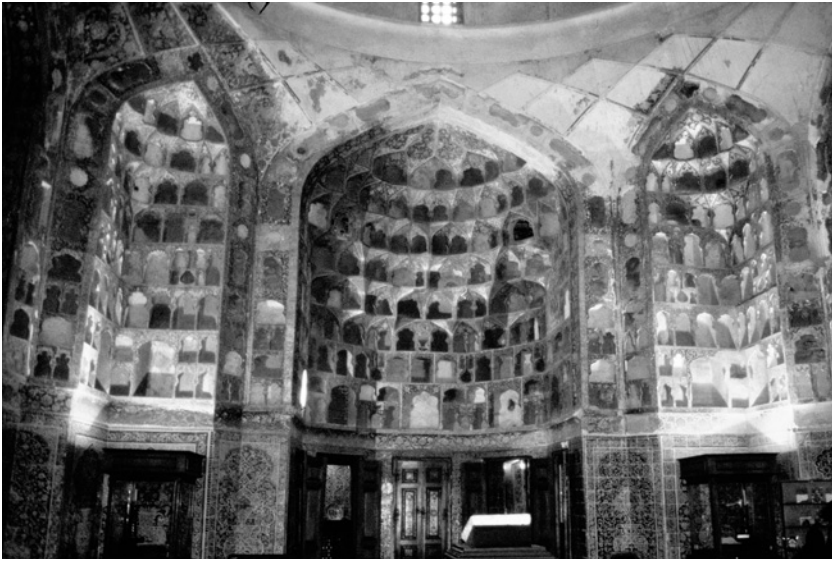


Figure 3. Chinikhana, Shrine of Shaikh Safi al-Din, Ardabil. Author's photograph.

inconveniently located in cities often under Ottoman control, like Baghdad and Najaf, as were the holy cities of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. As a result, Shah 'Abbas, like his grandfather, Shah Tahmasb (d. 1576), undertook extensive architectural renovations in Ardabil and Mashhad, making them the primary religious centres in western and eastern Iran, respectively.

In 1608, Shah 'Abbas made a pious endowment in the name of the Fourteen Innocents (Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, and the twelve Shi'i imams).¹⁰ Through it he gave his entire collection of manuscripts and precious objects to the shrines of Shaikh Safi and Imam Riza. To Ardabil went the imperial collection of porcelains and books on history and literature, and to Mashhad were sent ancient Qur'ans and books on theology and jurisprudence. Augmenting the prestige of the dynastic shrine of Shaikh Safi, Shah 'Abbas ordered extensive renovations, which included the construction of a magnificent Chinikhana (Porcelain House) to house the collection (fig. 3).¹¹ The majestic interior consists of intricately carved wall and ceiling niches that are painted in opulent hues of

¹⁰ For an insightful analysis of the context of the 1608 endowment, see McChesney, "Waqf and Public Policy".

¹¹ Rizvi, "Imperial Setting", 103.

red, blue and gold. Shah 'Abbas' collection was kept in the imperial palace in Isfahan before its transfer to Ardabil and Mashhad, although it is not clear where. The Chinikhana is, nonetheless, formally related to the fifth-floor atrium in the 'Ali Qapu gateway at the entrance to the palace. Thus, in his architectural renovations in Ardabil, Shah 'Abbas was linking the palace and the shrine, both physically and conceptually.

The blurring of boundaries between Shah 'Abbas' royalty and his elevated status as the scion of a great Sufi master was extended outwards from the ancestral shrine to include numerous other religious sites. In nearby Ahar, the tomb of the Suhrawardi Shaikh Shihab al-Din Mahmud was renovated in 1608. Similarly, the tomb of Amin al-Din Gibra'il, the father of Shaikh Safi was rebuilt in 1620 by orders of Shah 'Abbas (fig. 4).¹² The interiors of both structures were richly decorated as would have befitted a royal commission. Although the reason for the patronage of Amin al-Din Gibra'il's tomb is obvious, the extensive attention paid to the Sufi Shihab al-Din Mahmud is not immediately clear. A closer inspection of the interior of the Dar al-Huffaz (Hall of Qur'an-Readers) of the shrine of Shaikh Safi, which Shah 'Abbas renovated at the same time as the Chinikhana to which it is attached, reveals an inscription naming Shaikh Safi's spiritual lineage, which included Shihab al-Din 'Ahari'. Thus, although polemics of this time sometimes denigrate Sufism in favour of a more normative interpretation of Shi'ism, the Shah's architectural patronage points to a more complex attitude towards religious identity. The primary criterion of imperial attention was that the holy figures—Sufi or Shi'i, men or women—be associated with the Safavid dynasty.¹³

The shrine of Imam Riza was a popular site for the Safavid rulers. Shah Tahmasb had built a dome of gold bricks over the sanctuary and endowed the shrine with monetary gifts and precious objects. Mashhad was the most prestigious Shi'i monument in Iran and Shah 'Abbas expended great wealth and resources to assure its prosperity. However, during the first decade of his reign, that is, 1587–97, Mashhad was occupied by the Uzbeks, who defiled the holy site and raided the shrine, removing the gold tiles and other precious objects. After the re-conquest of Mashhad

¹² The chroniclers such as Munajjim Yazdi and Iskandar Munshi pay a great deal of attention to 'Abbas' visits to these sites. See Rizvi, "Marking the Sacred Landscape" in *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine*.

¹³ Gleave, "Rituals at the Shrines".



Figure 4. Tomb of Amin al-Din Gibra'il, Kalkhuran. Author's photograph.

in 1598, Shah 'Abbas ordered major constructions and improvements to the city, such as the building of new roads and water canals (fig. 5).¹⁴ The sanctuary of the Imam was expanded and renovated and its dome retiled in order to restore the shrine to its former glory.

Important complements to the Shah's architectural patronage were his public acts of devotion toward the shrine of Imam Riza, performed in thanks for his re-conquest of Khurasan. The victory was seen as rightly-guided and divinely-inspired. Shah 'Abbas made numerous visits to Mashhad to commemorate important events; similarly, his triumph over the Ottomans in the west was celebrated by pilgrimage to the shrine of Shaikh Safi in Ardabil. One of the more remarkable public displays was his barefoot pilgrimage in 1601, from his capital in Isfahan.¹⁵ Iskandar Munshi, like other court historians, singled this event out as a supreme example of Shah 'Abbas' piety and humility. The event was considered remarkable, for "since the advent of Islam, no prince has accomplished such a feat." Iskandar writes that the Shah spent the winter in the holy city of Mashhad, "devoting himself to religious observances during the sacred months of Rajab, Sha'ban, and Ramadan... On the most holy days of

¹⁴ Munajjim Yazdi, *Tarikh-i 'Abbasi*, 217.

¹⁵ Melville, "Shah 'Abbas and the Pilgrimage", 195.



Figure 5. Shrine of Imam 'Ali Riza, Mashhad. Courtesy of the British Museum, London. Photographer, Khadim Bayat.

these months, namely, on Thursday nights, the night on which Muhammad received the call to his prophetic mission, the day of the Opening, the Day of Assignment, and the Night of Power, the Shah kept vigil from early morning until sunrise, performing various menial tasks at the shrine such as snuffing the candles."¹⁶

In the chronicle by one of Shah 'Abbas' close companions, Mulla Jalal Yazdi the astronomer (*munajjim*), divine agency imbued the ruler's personal devotion and also his patronage of works of art, be they books or buildings. The barefoot pilgrimage was part of this image, characterising the Shah as a simple devotee of the Imam. The Shah's servility toward the Shi'i imamate was marked by one of his titles, "Dog of the Threshold of 'Ali" (*kalb-i astan-i 'Ali*), which was also used as a signature on the objects and manuscripts that the Shah endowed to the shrines at Ardabil and Mashhad. The appellation was used by Yazdi who, while acknowledging Shah 'Abbas' humility, also described miraculous and supernatural events surrounding him.

The overlaying of humanity and divinity in the person of the king was a common trope in the early modern period. It may be best witnessed in the representations of kingship related to the great Mughal Padshah, Akbar, whose reign overlapped that of Shah 'Abbas. In the *Akbarnama*, written by the courtier, Abu'l-Fazl, the author writes, "Behold the world-adorning qualities of our spiritual and temporal king so that thou mayst know what is kingship, and what is the meaning of sovereignty!"¹⁷ Akbar was thought to be imbued with semi-divinity, but he was also portrayed as a devotee of holy figures such as the Sufi, Shaikh Mu'in al-Din Chishti. A pair of illustrations from a 1590 copy of the *Akbarnama* show Akbar's pilgrimage to the city of Ajmer where the shrine of Mu'in al-Din is located.¹⁸ The ruler walks on foot, followed by a phalanx of courtiers and attendants, his gaze fixed on the distant horizon where the white domes of the shrine peak out from within a dense forest. The following image, also designed by the famed artist Basawan, is in two registers, the top showing Akbar standing barefoot in the shrine precincts, meeting the Chishti shaikh; below is his massive entourage (fig. 6). In both paintings, Akbar is dressed in a simple white tunic, with an unadorned turban on his head. The Indian context of

¹⁶ Iskandar Munshi, *History of Shah 'Abbas*, 800–801.

¹⁷ Abu'l-Fazl 'Allami, *Akbarnama*, I, 25; quoted in Lal, "Settled, Sacred and All-powerful", 945.

¹⁸ Abu'l-Fazl 'Allami, "Emperor Akbar on Pilgrimage to Ajmer by foot", *Akbarnama*, Victoria and Albert Museum, no. IS.2:77–1896.

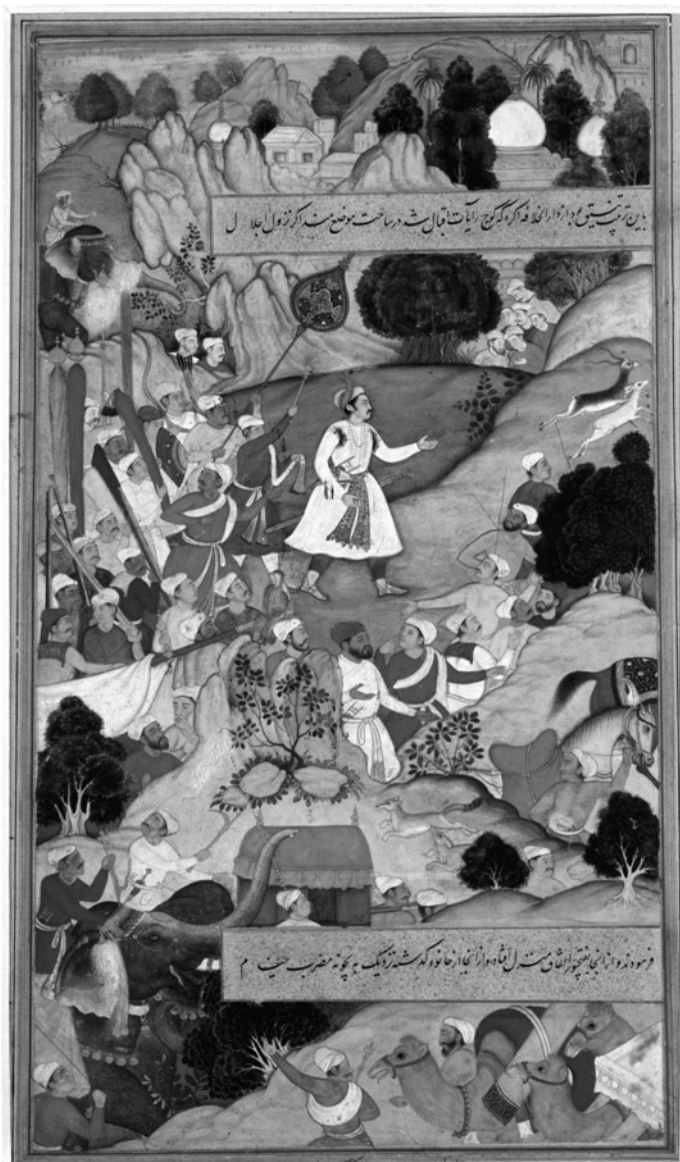


Figure 6. "Akbar's Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Mu'in al-Din Chishti", *Akbarnama*. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Museum, London.

the images clearly sets them apart from the Safavid context, but the meaning conveyed by them, namely, of imperial piety, could be easily applied to the pilgrimages undertaken by Shah 'Abbas.¹⁹

The similarity between Akbar and Shah 'Abbas' public enactment of piety are not surprising, given their shared culture and dynastic history.²⁰ There were numerous avenues of contact between the two courts, from the exchange of ambassadors and gifts, to the mobility of artists and merchants residing in the capital cities of Isfahan, Agra, Lahore and Delhi.²¹ Both rulers modelled their visions of kingship on the Timurid rulers of Iran, whose mantle they both inherited—the Safavids as the successor dynasty and the Mughals as direct descendant of Tamerlane and Chinggis Khan.²² The patronage of architecture and the support of charitable institutions was a prerogative of kingship, as was supplication toward religious leaders and the public display of piety. Just as Akbar singled out the Chishti shaikhs as his spiritual mentors, Shah 'Abbas was selective in his attention toward the shrines of Shi'i imams and those Sufi figures associated with the Safavid lineage. In both cases these associations served the goal of legitimising the rulers' authority and augmenting their sanctity, while at the same time making their humanity tangible. The customary rituals of devotion performed by Shah 'Abbas at the holy shrine of Imam Riza was thus an important facet in the construction of his imperial image, to be understood within the parameters of Safavid art and history in particular, and of the region in general.

The Spectacular City

The capital cities of the early modern Muslim empires were thriving metropolises that were home to diverse populations and a range of public institutions. During the early years of the Safavid dynasty, Tabriz and then Qazvin served as the imperial capitals under the first four rulers. However, in about 1591 Shah 'Abbas chose to move the capital to an old and

¹⁹ The similarity between Akbar and 'Abbas's public pilgrimages has also been noted by Melville, "Shah 'Abbas and the Pilgrimage", 193.

²⁰ Edwards, "Relations of Shah Abbas the Great".

²¹ Safavid historians often make note of ambassadorial visits, for example, Munajjim Yazdi, 255. Similarly, a large part of the bazaar in Isfahan was dedicated to Hindu merchants and moneychangers from India. Haneda, "Character of Urbanization".

²² Quinn, "Notes on Timurid Legitimacy". The Mughal genealogy was emphasised at great length in the illustrated *Akbarnama*.

established centre, Isfahan. Numerous reasons have been given for Shah 'Abbas' choice, among them the need to move away from Iran's northwest borders which were under constant Ottoman attack, the availability of water, and the city's centrality vis-à-vis east-west trade routes and the Persian Gulf. A recent study suggests the significance of Isfahan as the seat of a newly-imagined Perso-Shi'i form of governance, one that was designed to perpetuate Shah 'Abbas' merging of Iranian and Islamic symbols of authority.²³ In addition to these insights, it is also necessary to situate the city within its regional context, and to consider its establishment through the lens of dynastic ambitions.²⁴

Shah 'Abbas' Isfahan was conceived of as competing with other great capitals of the early modern world. The Ottomans were at the height of their glory after Sultan Suleyman's expansion of the Empire, which resulted in a complex centralisation of bureaucracy and the arts.²⁵ Their capital, Istanbul, was heralded not only for the power it represented, but its beauty and majesty.²⁶ Ottoman–Safavid rivalry has been a topic for understanding the political and religious ideologies of both empires; to this, one may also add their seats of government. Similarly, Akbar's capitals in Lahore and Agra attracted missionaries and merchants from all over the world, their legendary wealth described in works of art as well as in the diaries of travellers. According to his historians, in 1571 Akbar established a new capital, Fatehpur Sikri, about 25 miles from Agra, in commemoration of a pious vow that he would be blessed with a male heir.²⁷ Although Akbar did not remain very long in Fatehpur Sikri (it was abandoned in 1585) its reputation, as that of the older Mughal capitals, would have spread far and wide. Given the close diplomatic relations between Shah 'Abbas and his Mughal counterparts, it would not be inconceivable to assume that India was also an important source of inspiration for the establishment of the new Safavid capital.

Isfahan was an important city in central Iran since the eighth century. The famed Congregational Mosque was patronized by the Saljuq vizier, Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092), and was situated in the centre of the medieval

²³ Babaie, *Isfahan and its Palaces*. An alternate version is provided in Blake, "Transfer of the Safavid Capital".

²⁴ An important comparative study of imperial palaces is provided by Neçipoglu, "Framing the Gaze", 303–42.

²⁵ Neçipoglu, "A *Kānūn* for the State".

²⁶ Eldem et al., *Ottoman City between East and West*.

²⁷ Abu'l-Fazl, *Akbarnama*, II, 530–31. See also Brand and Lowry, eds. *Fatehpur Sikri: A Sourcebook*. On Mughal cities, see Petruccioli, "City as an Image".

town. Upon ascension to the throne, Shah Tahmasb renovated the building and his name was inscribed in the central courtyard.²⁸ Earlier, Shah Isma‘il’s governor, Durmish Khan Shamlu, had ordered the renovation of the old Masjid-i ‘Ali and the construction of the Harun-i Vilayat mausoleum, both near the Congregational Mosque.²⁹ However, when the time came for Shah ‘Abbas to put his own imprint on the city, he moved away from the medieval centre to a site in the southern edge of the city. A covered bazaar connected the old centre to Shah ‘Abbas’ new imperial quarter, which had begun in 1590–91 with the construction of a vast plaza, called the Maidan-i Naqsh-i Jahan (“Representation of the World” Square). By 1598 the Palace and the Chahar-Bagh Avenue had been built and the city was declared to be the new seat of government (*dar al-saltanat*).³⁰

Monuments were built on all four sides of the Maidan, representing the Shah’s political and religious ideology. On the north was Qaisariyya (“The Imperial”), an imposing two-storied portal (*ivan*) that served as the entrance into the covered bazaar connecting the old city centre with the new Maidan (fig. 7). The portal was embellished with large wall paintings showing Shah ‘Abbas’ victories over the Uzbeks as well as hunting scenes. A large clock was installed on the parapet of the roof after Shah ‘Abbas secured the island of Hormuz from the Portuguese in 1622.³¹ Inside the bazaar were caravanserais and baths, among numerous shops belonging to a variety of trades. There were special segments of the bazaar that belonged to money-changers and cloth-merchants, as well as merchants of differing ethnicity and religions.³² The vitality of the bazaar reflected Shah ‘Abbas’ successful attempts at rejuvenating Iran’s economy by encouraging trade as well as setting up export manufactories of ceramics and silk. The majestic portal celebrated that prosperity.

On the western side of the Maidan was the Palace, consisting of a series of freestanding buildings devoted to diplomatic audiences, entertainment, and devotion. The harem was also situated within the walled enclosure, along with its own ancillary buildings for the upkeep of the imperial household. The formal entrance into the Palace was from the

²⁸ Rafi‘i, *Athar-i milli-yi Isfahan*, 538.

²⁹ The architect for both projects was Mirza Shah Husain, a prominent courtier and companion of Shah Isma‘il. The foundation inscriptions are reproduced in Hunarfar, *Ganjina-yi athar-i tarikh-yi Isfahan*, 360, 369.

³⁰ The dates have been established in McClesney, “Four Sources”.

³¹ An interesting study of the construction stages and elements of the Qaisariyya is Ritter, “Das königlich Portal”.

³² Haneda, “Character of Urbanization”, 373.

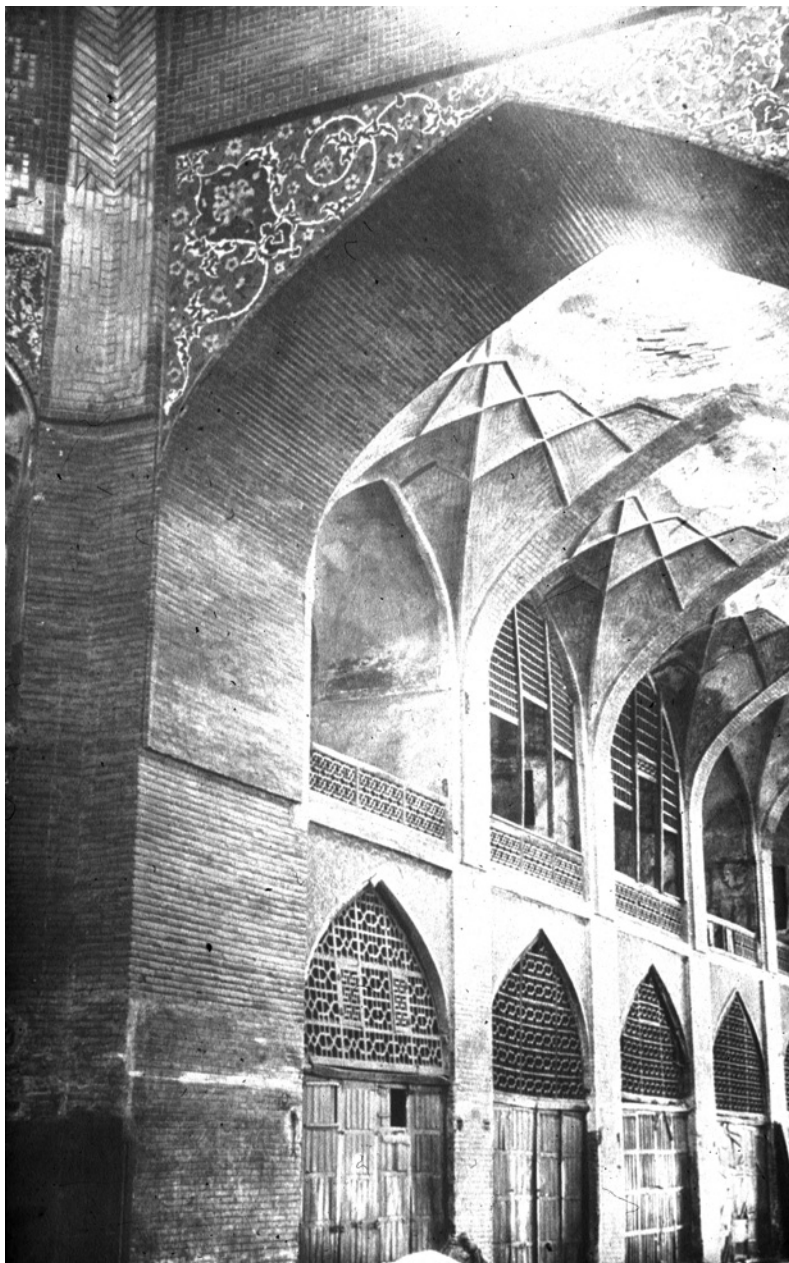


Figure 7. Qaisariyya ('The Imperial'), Isfahan. Photograph courtesy of Yale University Visual Resources Collection.



Figure 8. 'Ali Qapu Gateway, Isfahan. Author's photograph.

Maidan and through the 'Ali Qapu gateway ("the Lofty Portal"), a five-storey, multi-functional building (fig. 8). The gateway was considered to be a sacred threshold, where passers by fell to the ground in devotion, not unlike the entrances to the shrines in Ardabil and Mashhad.³³ Just beyond the 'Ali Qapu was the octagonal Tauhidkhana ("Hall of Unity") where Sufis loyal to Shah 'Abbas would gather to sing praises and prayer for their beloved leader.³⁴ The charisma of the king was thus constructed as an amalgam of Sufi and Shi'i authority, overlaid by his position as the divinely inspired Shah.

Two mosques were built on the eastern and southern sides of the Maidan, the Masjid-i Shaikh Lutf-Allah and the Masjid-i Shah, respectively. The former is a small, jewel-like building, named after the noted Shi'i cleric and father-in-law of Shah 'Abbas.³⁵ It provides a singular contrast to the 'Ali Qapu, such that the mosque and the palace may be

³³ Kaempfer, *Am Hofe des persischen Grosskonigs*, 212. Also Necipoglu, "Framing the Gaze", 309.

³⁴ Iskandar Munshi, *History of Shah 'Abbas*, 463.

³⁵ Construction on the building was begun in 1602 and the epigraphy in the interior was designed by the famed calligrapher, 'Ali-Riza 'Abbasi. Canby, *Golden Age of Persian Art*, 98. Shaikh Lutf-Allah's biography is given in Iskandar Munshi, *History of Shah 'Abbas*, 229–30.



Figure 9. Masjed-i Shah, Isfahan. Photograph by Baroness Marie-Thérèse Ullens de Schooten. Courtesy of Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University.

construed as complementary aspects of the Shah's imperial persona. The Masjed-i Shah, called Friday Mosque in the foundation inscription, is an architectural counterpoint to the Qaisariyya, with its large *ivan* mirroring the entrance portal of the bazaar (fig. 9). Constructed in 1611, the Friday Mosque was the first congregational mosque to have been built in Safavid Iran, almost one hundred years after the establishment of the dynasty. In contrast with their Ottoman neighbours, who viewed the building of congregational mosques as a ruler's duty, the early Safavids' hesitation was based on the particularities of Shi'i Islam, which discouraged the Friday *khutba*, or sermon, in the absence of the twelfth Imam. This issue had been a source of ambivalence among the Safavid rulers and was highly criticised in the polemics launched against them by their Ottoman rivals. Safavid jurists were called upon by Shah 'Abbas to amend Shi'i law such that by the beginning of the seventeenth century the public congregational prayers on Fridays were deemed an acceptable form of religious praxis.³⁶

³⁶ Safavid commentaries on the issue of the Friday prayer are collected in Ja'fariyan, *Davazdah risala-yi fiqhi*. Also discussed in Newman, "Fayd al-Kashani".

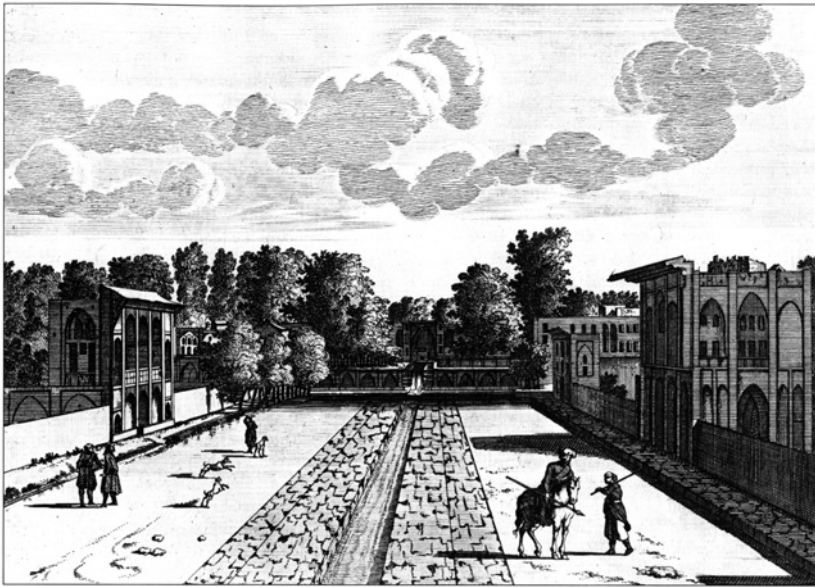


Figure 10. Chahar Bagh Avenue, Isfahan, by Cornelis de Bruyn. Courtesy of Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University.

The issue of the Friday prayer was crucial to Shah ‘Abbas’ move toward a version of Shi‘ism that could be recognised through the lens of normative Islam. In addition, the tradition of naming the ruler in the Friday sermon would be a recognised way of legitimising Shah ‘Abbas’ authority.³⁷ The propagation of Shi‘i practice was undertaken on many different levels; for example, the clerics were called upon to write treatises explaining the new laws in a manner that would be accessible to all. The most prominent of these was the *Jami‘-i ‘Abbasi*, by the Shaikh al-Islam, Shaikh Baha’ al-Din ‘Amili (d. 1621), a collection of treatises on the proper performance of Shi‘i rituals such as prayer and pilgrimage.³⁸

The Maidan-i Naqsh-i Jahan was thoughtfully composed to highlight Shah ‘Abbas’ worldview by the careful placement of monuments of commercial, religious and imperial splendour. The central square itself was

³⁷ This point is brought up in Neçipoglu, “Qur’anic Inscriptions”, 91.

³⁸ The book begins with instructions on the correct rituals of prayer, including Friday prayers. Baha’ al-Din ‘Amili, *Jami‘-i ‘Abbasi*, 31–93. It is important to note that the treatise was written in Persian and meant for a wider audience than the clerical establishment, which wrote primarily in Arabic.

used for wrestling matches, selling wares and playing polo, among other activities. The arcades along the periphery were reserved for shops, the rent of which went into the imperial treasury and into the charitable endowments established by Shah 'Abbas. The Shah was often seen sitting along the upper balconies viewing the games and partaking in the general festivities with his courtiers and, sometimes, the public gathered below.³⁹ The air of informality was in contrast to the solemnity of the buildings, whose façades acted as backdrops to the extravaganzas taking place within the square. Behind the palace a new thoroughfare was built, the Chahar Bagh Avenue (fig. 10), flanked by mansions and arboreal pathways leading to the majestic Allahverdi Khan Bridge. The avenue was a place of another type of public display, of the courtiers and dignitaries close to the Shah, whose prosperity was an additional marker of the Safavid Empire's success. The spectacular cityscape of Isfahan was blanketed with the aura of benevolent kingship, such that it appeared that the majestic capital was protected by the grace of Shah 'Abbas himself.

Humanity Enthroned

The splendour of Shah 'Abbas was reflected in the ceremonial that took place within the shrines, palaces and mosques that he patronised and built. Less tangible, but as powerful, were his public performances of authority and humility. The barefoot pilgrimages to holy shrines showed the Shah's religious zeal, and his supplication served as an exemplar of devotion to the Shi'i creed and Sufi traditions. It was a compelling balance to his charismatic persona as the descendant of the Shi'i imam, Musa al-Kazim, and the shaikh, Safi al-Din Ardabili. His luminescence was extolled in the chronicles penned by the court historians, and made real in the manner in which whole cities were illuminated in his honour. Shah 'Abbas' enthusiasm for *chiraghan* (illuminations) was well known and commented upon by courtiers and visitors alike.⁴⁰ The urban landscape of Iran was envisioned as a galaxy of stars, strung together by shared rituals of devotion and imperial ceremonial.

The association of kingship and light is a familiar trope, and one easily recognisable in both the Iranian and Islamic cultural spheres within

³⁹ Many of the European visitors at the court made note of the Shah's accessibility and informality, as noted in Neçipoglu, "Framing the Gaze", 511.

⁴⁰ Such as Herbert, *Relation of Some Yeares Travaile*, 82.

which Shah 'Abbas' authority was constructed. Cities such as Isfahan, Kashan and Qum, would be decked out in advance of Shah 'Abbas' arrival. The merchants in the bazaar would decorate their storefronts with banners and colourful "European" textiles.⁴¹ Camphor and oil lamps would be lit as soon as the Shah entered the city so that he would be met with a glowing and aromatic metropolis waiting in anticipation to greet him. Fireworks would be set off and amazing mechanical contraptions set into motion to delight the ruler and to amaze his subjects. The court historian, Afushtah Natanzi, paints a vivid picture of the festivities that took place in 1595:

In those same most delightful days, when the obeyed order was issued to assemble the above-mentioned foot soldiers [in Isfahan], the sublime indication having been signaled with regard to the provision of equipment, instruments, and apparatus for the [planned] festival of lights, over the course of two or three months masters of the arts, artisan masters, artists of pure creativity, and devisers of sublime disposition were assembled in the City of Kingship of Iraq [Isfahan] from all parts of Iraq and Fars. Over the course of two or three months masters of the arts, artisan masters, artists of pure creativity, and devisers of sublime disposition were assembled in the City of Kingship of Iraq [Isfahan] from all parts of Iraq and Fars. Whatever their gifted minds and wise-natured wills suggested was splendidly executed on manifestation's stage. Through the power of the fingertips of the portrait painting [one] and the capability of the world-embellishing [one], the veil was lifted from the cheek of the examples of these inventions which had been concealed to an extreme degree in the seclusion of hiding and had not been apparent to the sight of the mind's eye of [even] the perfect master of this magical art.⁴²

In Natanzi's representation, Shah 'Abbas was the inspiration that unleashed the imagination of the masterful artists and artisans who designed the entertainment. He was attributed with the power to "unveil" creativity and was, in a way, the true craftsman in whose hands anything was possible. His ability to gather together the greatest inventors of the age, from all over the kingdom, spoke of his power, authority, and the richness of his realm. The sense of wonder created by the illuminated architectural settings, the fireworks, and the mechanical devices, fed into this representation of the Shah, creating a perfect backdrop to his own divinely-inspired persona.

⁴¹ Afushtah Natanzi, *Naqawat al-Athar*, 463.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 577. Translated in McChesney, "Four Sources," 107.

Despite the monumentality of 'Abbas' achievements and his elevated genealogy, the ruler appeared strikingly human. The city of Isfahan has been described as an epitome of "transparency"⁴³ and Shah 'Abbas' manner of rule "absolute and personal".⁴⁴ These characterisations were borne out by descriptions of the Shah as he interacted with the public as well as the numerous dignitaries at his court. In contrast with the remote figure of the Ottoman sultans, who increasingly secluded themselves, he was portrayed in fascinatingly intimate ways.

The sense of humility expressed by the Shah was evident in his honorific, "Dog of the Threshold of 'Ali" as well as in his public performances of piety. Even his mustachios drooped toward the earth, symbolizing the king's subservience to God.⁴⁵ In addition to architecture and literature, art was also implicated in the changing political and religious culture of Iran, as witnessed in a series of paintings from a 1605 deluxe manuscript of the *Shahnama*.⁴⁶ Throughout the sixteenth century the *Shahnama* of Firdausi was popularly, and appropriately, chosen for imperial patronage. The main subject of this epic is the continuing war between pre-Islamic Iran and its primary rival to the East, Turan (Turkistan).⁴⁷ The patron of the 1605 manuscript copy is unknown, but its artistic virtuosity meant that it was commissioned for a courtly audience. Many of the paintings are of subjects familiar to the *Shahnama* genre, made contemporary through the use of costumes and objects.

There are also new themes that are particular to the historical context of early modern Iran, as illustrated in a painting of the Shah Kay Kavus, folio 219r (fig. 11). The king was tempted by the Devil to fly to the sky in a magical throne lifted by eagles. However, he was unsuccessful in his attempt and, when the throne came crashing to earth, Kay Kavus asked

⁴³ Babaie, *Isfahan and its Palaces*, 12.

⁴⁴ Neçipoglu, "Framing the Gaze," 507.

⁴⁵ Della Valle, *The Pilgrim*, 159.

⁴⁶ This manuscript is part of my on-going research, which was partially funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and hosted by the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. The illustrations are reproduced in Enderlein and Sundermann, *Schahname, das persische Königsbuch*. The manuscript was most recently displayed at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin; see catalogue entry, Rizvi, "Könige, Helden und das Göttliche". For a more detailed study of the manuscript, see Rizvi, "The Suggestive Portrait of Shah 'Abbas".

⁴⁷ With 50,000 lines this is one of the longest poetic narratives in history. For two concise discussions of the meaning and method of the *Shahnama*, see Meisami, "The Past in the Service of the Present", and Davis' introduction to the new edition of the English translation by Levy, *Epic of the Kings*.

God for forgiveness for his *hubris*.⁴⁸ The illustration shows Kay Kavus' repentant prayer, as he sits upon a rug and raises his hands and eyes to the heavens. The image of a man sitting on a prayer rug is unprecedented in the iconography of the *Shahnama*, and the painting's subject appears to be less Firdausi's mythical age of Kay Kavus than the present context of Shah 'Abbas' Iran.⁴⁹

The centre of the painting is taken up by the figure of Kay Kavus and behind him is the collapsed throne. The king appears oblivious to what is taking place behind him, lost in prayer as he raises his hands to the Creator. The poetry on the page focuses on the king's prayer of forgiveness. Although the deity to whom Kay Kavus prays is identified as Yazdan (the Zoroastrian principle for Good), the painting depicts an Islamic ritual context.⁵⁰

The God named in the verses is Yazdan (the Zoroastrian term for the principle of Good) but Kay Kavus' prayer is very much an Islamic one. The king is shown sitting on the *sijdagah* (prayer rug), his imperial trappings shed beside him. On the *sijdagah* is a *tasbih* (prayer beads) and a *muhr*, which is a small tablet made often from the clay of Karbala or Mecca. The *muhr* is an important object in Shi'i devotion and its placement in the painting reiterates the particularities of that identity. Although not a direct reference, it is compelling to view this image through the lens of Safavid debates on the validity of the Friday prayer, the resolution of which resulted in the construction of the monumental Masjid-i Shah in Isfahan, mentioned earlier. On another level, the image also depicts imperial authority as a complex amalgam of human and divine interactions. Both the text and image reiterate the importance of humility in the person of the king, a persona cultivated by Shah 'Abbas. Together, they allow entry into a dimension of imperial authority that is often masked or overlooked: the place of the individual subject.

* * *

The bridges and caravanserais, the shrine of Imam Riza, and the capital, Isfahan, all shared in the goal of augmenting the legitimacy of Shah 'Abbas

⁴⁸ Levy, *Epic of the Kings*, 60. See also Abdullaeva, "Kingly Flight", for a detailed analysis of this episode. I am grateful to Dr. Abdullaeva for sharing her pre-publication manuscript with me.

⁴⁹ The absence of religious ritual is also noted in Simpson and Clinton, "Text and Image", 233. However, there are earlier paintings showing the protagonists in more general, supplicatory, poses.

⁵⁰ Warner and Warner, *Sháhnáma of Firdausi*, 104–5.



Figure 11. "Kay Kavus' Prayer", *Shahnama* (1605). MS Diez 4251, fol. 219r.
 Courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin.

and the glory of his Empire. The changing scales in this essay, from the large urban reconstructions undertaken in cities like Isfahan and Mashhad, to Shah 'Abbas' intimate encounters in the shrines of holy figures, architecture served as a stage upon which the image of the ruler was performed. These diverse "landscapes", as it were, of spatial expression elucidate the need to consider the built environment as an important factor in understanding the political culture of early modern Iran. In addition, the material examined calls for a rethinking of the manner in which architectural historians of this period have considered their subject, by expanding the categories to include esoteric conceptions of territory, sacred landscapes, as well as utilitarian works of engineering, such as bridges and caravanserais. These "structures" were important cultural institutions in themselves, and certainly worthy of consideration on their formal merits as well. Together with literature and the visual arts, they resulted in a complex set of representations that formulated the portrait of the Safavid king, Shah 'Abbas.

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